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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 001534

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STATE FOR WHA/CEN, DRL/PHD, INR/AN/IAA, AND INR/B

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/30/2013

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: CARDINAL'S CORRUPTION COMMENTS SPARK PUBLIC
DEBATE; CARDINAL STILL RECEIVING DEATH THREATS

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 625

[1](#)B. 02 VATICAN 4582

[1](#)C. 02 TEGUCIGALPA 2054

[1](#)D. 02 TEGUCIGALPA 962 (ALL NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Larry Palmer;
Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. During a private meeting with the Ambassador on June 20, the Cardinal expressed heightened concern over the pervasiveness of drug-related corruption at the highest levels of government as well as continuing death threats he had received. Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga used the bully pulpit of his chairmanship of the National Anti-Corruption Council to raise questions about a corrupt political arrangement that was allegedly negotiated between Liberal Party President Rafael Pineda Ponce and former Honduran President Rafael Leonardo Callejas. The Cardinal's criticisms were widely reported by the media as truth and spawned a fiery response from Pineda Ponce, who challenged the Cardinal to come forward with his evidence of the supposed deal. END SUMMARY.

CARDINAL EXPRESSES CONCERN OVER CORRUPTION/DEATH THREATS

[1](#)2. (C) Cardinal Rodriguez expressed significant concern that drug-related corruption had penetrated the highest levels of the Congress and the Public Ministry in a June 20 meeting with the Ambassador. He provided the Ambassador with a confidential document from an informant, outlining

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allegations of corruption within the Public Ministry. (Note: Embassy had previously received this document from another source.) The Cardinal believes the culture of corruption and impunity in Honduras to be so pervasive that he was planning to resign from his position as Chair of the CNA. Additionally, the Cardinal relayed that threats to his life have continued in recent weeks. He has accepted an offer from the Ministry of Public Security for a single police officer to serve as a security detail during his public appearances only. The Ambassador urged the Cardinal not to resign and to continue his vigilance in fighting corruption.

[1](#)3. (C) During a March discussion with the Ambassador, Cardinal Rodriguez privately confided that he had received a recent death threat that merited concern (ref A). Though Post has been unable to assess the credibility of the gatekeeper's kidnapping story, the Cardinal interpreted the kidnapping to represent an escalation in the seriousness of threats to his life. The Cardinal indicated to the Ambassador in March that the recent threats would not deter his anti-corruption campaign.

ACCUSATIONS AGAINST PINEDA PONCE AND CALLEJAS

[1](#)4. (C) According to May 20 press reports, Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa (who is also rumored to be a potential successor to Pope John Paul II (ref B)) raised questions during a meeting of the National Anti-Corruption Council (CNA) that a corrupt political arrangement may have been negotiated between Liberal Party President Rafael Pineda Ponce, the former president of Congress who ran unsuccessfully against Ricardo Maduro for president in 2001, and former Honduran President Rafael Leonardo Callejas (1990-94), a Nationalist. According to the Cardinal, who described his sources as "faithful," Callejas influenced Nationalist Party judges on the Supreme Court to dismiss the case against the son-in-law of Pineda Ponce, Jorge Adolfo Chavez Hernandez, a former member of Battalion 3-16, who has been accused of masterminding the 1998 murder of environmentalist and Catacamas (in the Department of Olancho) town councilman, Carlos Antonio Luna Lopez. The Cardinal suggested that, in exchange, Pineda Ponce influenced Liberal Supreme Court judges to dismiss seven pending corruption cases against Callejas. The Cardinal's accusations call into question the legality of both politicians' actions as well as the credibility and

transparency of the Supreme Court. These press reports were confirmed by German Espinal, the Executive Director of the CNA.

15. (U) (Note: As stated in the Human Rights Report, in May and July 2002, police arrested Chavez and Jose Angel Rosa in the 1998 murder of Luna. The arrests occurred after both the prosecuting attorney and judge in the case received death threats. In May 2002 the local judge resigned from the court because of these death threats. Former security official Jose Marcos Hernandez Hernandez and two other suspects still remain at large and one other suspect in the murder, Oscar Aurelio "Machetillo" Rodriguez Molina, remains in prison. End Note.)

REACTIONS OF THE ACCUSED

16. (C) On June 18, after weeks of avoiding a direct confrontation with the Cardinal, Pineda Ponce publicly challenged the Cardinal to present his evidence to a court. In a letter sent to Attorney General Roy Medina, Pineda Ponce urged Medina to require the Cardinal to present his information regarding the supposed political arrangement between Pineda Ponce and Callejas. The same week, Chavez claimed his innocence in Luna's killing and accused the Cardinal of lashing out at Honduran politicians as part of a strategy for winning the papacy. Callejas has not responded publicly to the Cardinal's allegations but noted his deep respect for the Cardinal as a moral leader. The Cardinal has declined to comment on Pineda Ponce's challenge. Espinal told EmbOffs that the Cardinal would present his testimony and evidence to the Attorney General's Office on June 26 during a sworn deposition.

THE CARDINAL'S ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN

17. (U) As chair of the CNA, Cardinal Rodriguez is leading a campaign to implement a 20-year national anti-corruption strategy (refs C and D). President Ricardo Maduro (Nationalist Party) ratified and endorses the work of the CNA, which receives funding from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programs, as well as from several bilateral donors, such as USAID. Last year, the Cardinal called for the creation of an international court to try corruption cases and to channel confiscated funds back into developing countries. The Cardinal has urged Hondurans to acknowledge the depths of the corruption problem and to support an anti-corruption strategy buttressed by political will.

CARDINAL CLAIMS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES APATHETIC

18. (SBU) In a private meeting with the Ambassador in March, the Cardinal also expressed his desire that the international community employ stricter conditionalities on developing countries as a deterrent to corruption. During the week of June 7, the Cardinal publicly charged developed countries apathetic toward what he considers to be an exorbitant debt burden and crushing interest rates in developing countries. The Cardinal deemed a lack of political will, and not a lack of funds, to be the chief impediment to resolving the debt problem in developing countries. In particular, the Cardinal cited the multi-billion dollar commitment of developed nations to wage war in Iraq as an example of the availability of funds and political will to employ them.

INFLUENCE OF CARDINAL GIVES COMMENTS ADDED WEIGHT

19. (C) Comment: Even though the details surrounding the Cardinal's statements on Pineda Ponce and Callejas have yet to be revealed, both the Honduran media and the public at large have embraced the story as truth. Meanwhile, Pineda Ponce's response to the Cardinal represents a bold and risky political maneuver. That Pineda Ponce chose to directly address the alleged criticisms speaks to the perceived power of the Cardinal's rhetoric to sting high profile figures. A recent public survey rated Cardinal Rodriguez the third most powerful figure in Honduras, behind President Maduro and the Ambassador. Meanwhile, this unfolding drama appears to have given voice to a Honduran public frustrated by rampant corruption and impunity. It has also sparked a vigorous debate in the media about corruption in all major public institutions, especially the Attorney General's Office and the police. Given the threats to the Cardinal's life, his high political profile within Honduras and possible candidacy for the papacy, both the allegations of pervasive narco-corruption and concerns over the Cardinal's physical

security merit careful monitoring. End Comment.

Palmer